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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001121

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TAGS: [CASC](#) [PREL](#) [IS](#) [ISRAEL](#) [RELATIONS](#) [ECONOMY](#) [AND](#) [FINANCE](#) [GOI](#) [EXTERNAL](#)

SUBJECT: ISRAELI TOURISM MINISTER REQUESTS CHANGE IN U.S.

TRAVEL WARNING

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary. During a February 23 meeting with the Ambassador, Minister of Tourism Abraham Hirschson stressed the GOI's hope that the USG would change the travel warning regarding travel to Israel. The Ambassador replied that the USG reviewed such warnings on a regular basis, but noted that terror attacks in Israel had killed 43 U.S. citizens since the beginning of the current Intifada in September 2000. Minister Hirschson and the Ambassador also discussed the possibility of increasing U.S. tourism to Israel, and examined opportunities for package tours involving Israel, Egypt and Jordan. Hirschson said he was phasing out his Ministry's support for projects in the occupied territories and noted he wished to improve cooperation with Israeli Arabs in the tourism sphere. End Summary.

Travel Warning

12. (C) Minister of Tourism Hirschson and Ministry of Tourism Marketing Administrator Rami Levi spent the majority of the meeting with the Ambassador on the subject of the travel warning. Levi maintained that his research showed that the warning represented the major obstacle to increasing tourism to Israel. Whereas the number of Jewish tourists from the United States to Israel had actually increased since 1999, the number of non-Jews had fallen significantly. This factor was very important in view of the key role played by evangelical Christians who would normally view Israel as a natural travel destination. Levi noted the travel warning made it very difficult for visitors to obtain travel insurance. This meant that Pastors and Rabbis leading groups to Israel could personally be sued should something happen to the groups they would lead here. All of this meant a significant loss of revenues for the government, lower employment, lower hotel usage, among other important impacts. Other governments, such as Germany, based their stance towards travel to Israel on the U.S. warning as well, he noted.

13. (C) Levi claimed that "Israel is just as safe as many places without a travel warning." He stressed that the USG should not merely consider threats against a country when deciding on travel warnings, but also countries' ability to defend against these threats. He said that Conde Nast had called Ben Gurion airport the "safest airport in the world," and that Travel and Leisure magazine had called "an Israeli airline" the world's safest. In any case, the number of terror attacks had decreased significantly over the past year. Even Secretary Rice, he said, had referred to new hopes for peace in the region. Hirschson asked whether it would be possible for the USG to create a travel warning that differentiated between various parts of Israel. The "time had come to remove the travel warning," Hirschson claimed; even Pat Robertson had said he did not understand why it was in place.

14. (C) The Ambassador responded by noting that the USG reviewed its travel warnings on a regular basis, taking into account all new, relevant information. He stressed the ultimate and statutory responsibility of the U.S. government to maintain the safety of its citizens, and noted that 43 of the 1,100 people killed in the Intifada to date as a result of violence were U.S. citizens. Three of these were Embassy security personnel killed in Gaza purely because they were Americans. He also noted that, although the number of completed terror attacks had decreased recently, Israel's internal security service (the Shin Bet) had repeatedly noted in classified briefings that the preparations for such attacks had not yet fallen off. The Ambassador said that the USG had reservations about the idea of differentiated travel warnings as these inevitably confused tourists, particularly those new to a country.

Bring on the Military: For R&R, That Is

15. (C) Levi then asked whether the USG would support the idea of bringing U.S. soldiers serving in Iraq to Israel on R&R travel. The Ambassador noted the complexities involved in making Israel an R&R destination for those serving in Iraq, but reminded the group of progress made in bringing

other U.S. military to Israel. Just three weeks ago a group of Navy sailors had spent a day in the port of Haifa, he noted.

Hirschson: Ministry of Tourism to
Eliminate Settlement Spending

16. (C) The Ambassador asked Hirschson about the status of Tourism Ministry support for settlements, reminding him of questionable "tourist" projects in the past such as the creation of a promenade in Hebron. Hirschson, requesting that notes not be made of this part of the conversation, said he planned to put a stop to such spending. He admitted that he did not know how much time he would have in the ministry to phase out such spending completely -- "a month, two months, or much longer" -- so a lot depended on how long he remained in place.

Cooperation with Palestinians

17. (C) Hirschson said he was looking forward to improved cooperation with his Palestinian counterpart, whoever that would end up being. He said he had met with the previous PA Minister of Tourism, Abu Aita, two weeks ago in a very positive meeting. He asked for the Ambassador's help in getting a PA representative to a meeting with the Pope that is planned for Friday, February 25. Because of the situation with the PA cabinet, Hirschson feared the Palestinians would delay the meeting. Hirschson was concerned that the Pope's medical condition made any delay extremely counterproductive. The Ambassador promised to contact Consulate General Jerusalem to see what could be done.

Cooperation with Jordan and Egypt

18. (C) As the meeting ended, Hirschson asked the Ambassador for help in working with the Jordanian and Egyptian ministers of tourism to build a regional tourism package involving the three countries. The Ambassador noted that he was aware of efforts in this sphere approximately ten years before. He promised to look into the issue.

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KURTZER